

PRESS B

BY PAUL MASON
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MAT TAIT

Tre and Muse follow the path across the plain. Ahead, the maunga wears a dusting of snow. The clouds are like horses' tails, swishing against blue sky.

Epic ...

This is pretty much as good as it gets.

Muse!

To continue, press A.
To select a new memory, press B.
To exit, press Menu.

Tre sees a puzzle of ragtag tarpaulins spread on the ground, their sad offerings picked over by the throng: a pile of cans, a jumble of clothes, bruised apples, cracked electronics, stale loaves of bread. All of it wedged into an alley that's in the shadow of towering concrete. Tre closes his eyes for a moment, trying to hold on to the mountains.

Five credits to carry on?

Thanks, but we're late for work.

We were so free.

On her forearm, a scar where the tracker had been. They'd spent months on the run.

Let's not forget this.

Nah. We were always one step ahead.

A sudden disturbance sweeps through the market.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.



When change came, all those years ago, it came quickly.



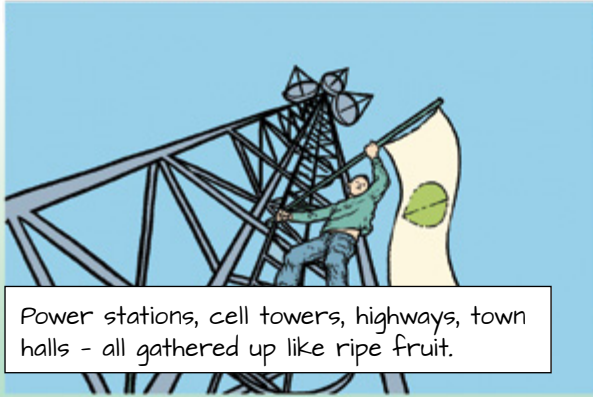
The call to rebellion seeped through the streets like a tide rising in mangroves.



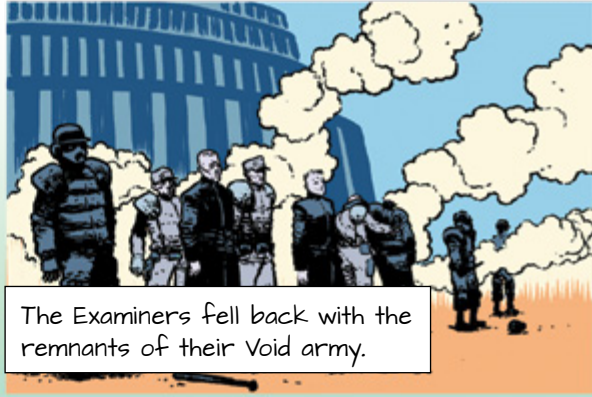
The Voids couldn't keep up.



Then in the autumn, the time to harvest, the Radicals struck.



Power stations, cell towers, highways, town halls - all gathered up like ripe fruit.



The Examiners fell back with the remnants of their Void army.



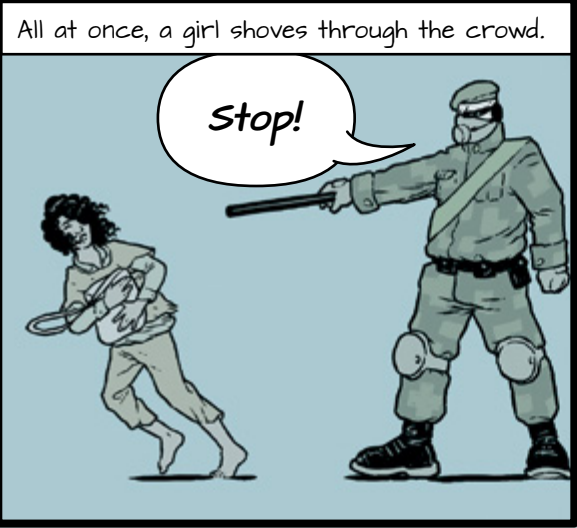
Tre and Muse were there when the white flag rose.



But the Autumn Revolution was a lifetime ago.

Let's go.

We're not doing anything wrong.



All at once, a girl shoves through the crowd.

Stop!



She trips and stumbles.



The patrol surrounds her.

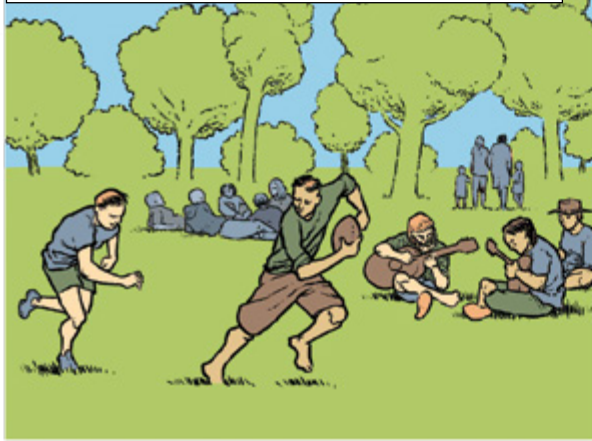


There's a wildness to the girl's eyes like a feral cat's. They fill with tears.

Hand her over.

What do you want with her?

With the battle won, there came a surge of freedom. Imagination spread like pollen.



Knowledge brought strength.

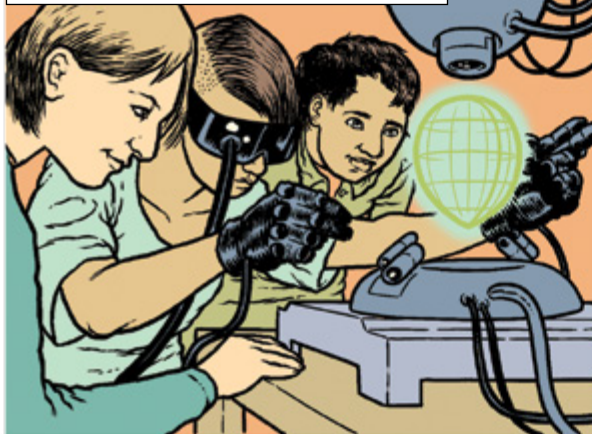


Wait.



I know you. You were in the Autumn Revolution.

For the first time in many years, the people could see a future.



Tre's parents, wearing the red band of the elders, sat on the Council.



We need to be on the same page with this one.

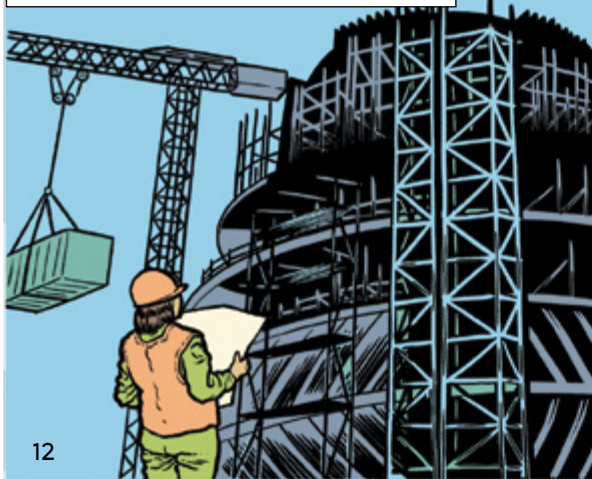
He waka eke noa.



How about you leave her be?

Show me what's in the bag, and we'll go.

There was much to change and do.

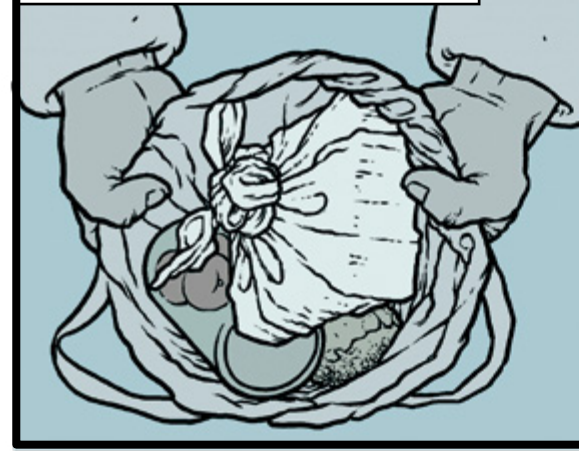


The first council's term ran its course, and they stepped away, happy to pass on the mantle. As it was meant to be ...



Wear it with pride.

A crust of bread, a dented can of tomatoes, a bundle wrapped in cloth.



Tre catches a flash of panic in the girl's eyes. The patrol leader catches it, too.



That bundle. Open it.



Contraband. A book.



I'd be worried, too, if I was her.



As time passed, things began to sour. Turned out the seats in the council chamber were too comfortable after all ...



Two terms became three. Three became four. The Council looked after its own.

All those in favour?



She's just a kid.



The book's mine. I brought it here to sell.



Some people stood to complain. But many were too distracted to notice.



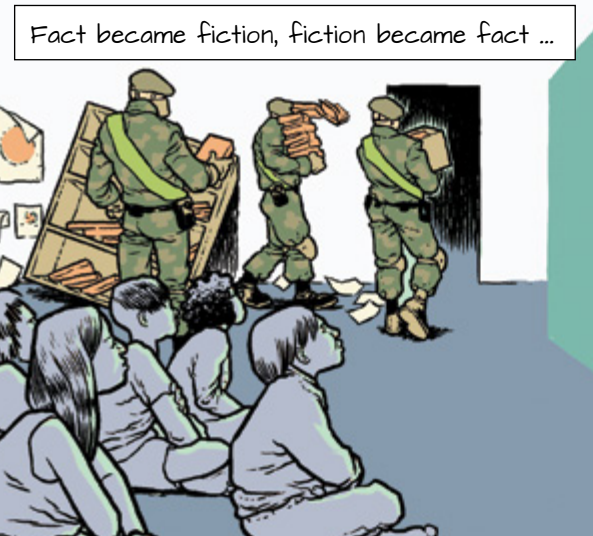
Fearing the same freedom they'd once fought to win, the Council put up walls, dividing the people.



Do you know what the punishment is for trading books?



Tre gives Muse and the girl a wink that only they can see. He's got this covered.



Fact became fiction, fiction became fact ...



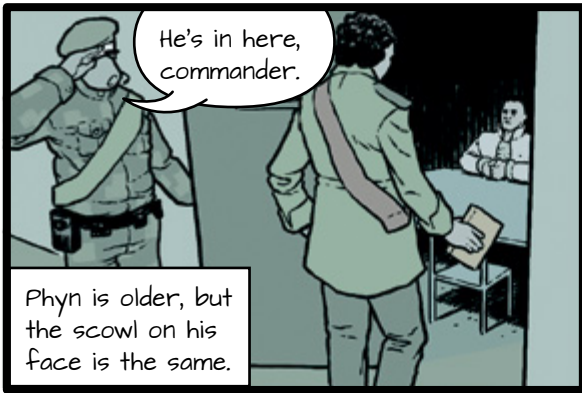
Tre was glad his parents didn't have to see.



The lift climbs. Tre loses count of the floors.



They rip the chain from his neck.



He's in here, commander.

Phyn is older, but the scowl on his face is the same.



I was wondering when I'd run into you.

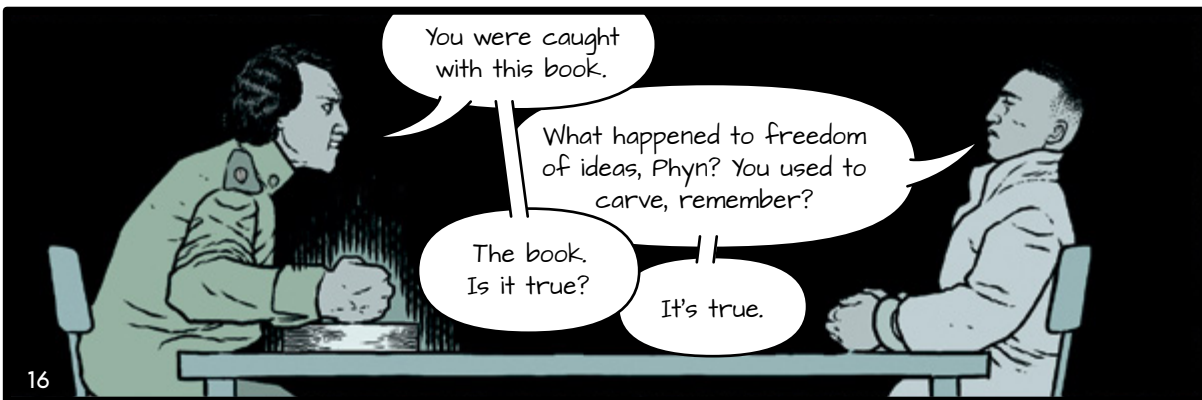


You can have this back.

It's not worth anything any more.



What did my parents ever see in you?



You were caught with this book.

What happened to freedom of ideas, Phyn? You used to carve, remember?

The book. Is it true?

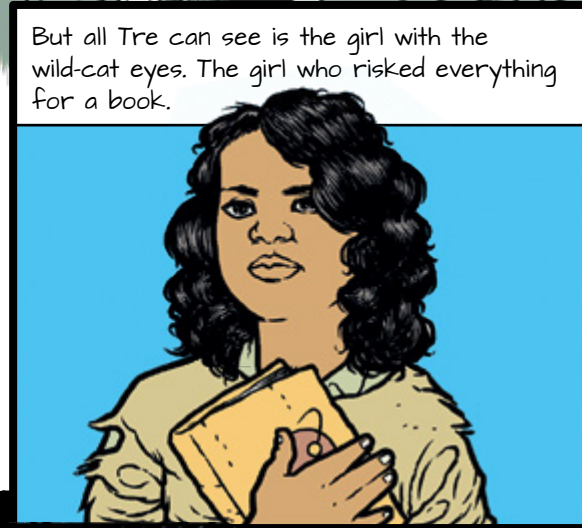
It's true.



The door to the pod hisses open. They shove Tre in.



The prisoners are all building towers: tall, square, and white.



But all Tre can see is the girl with the wild-cat eyes. The girl who risked everything for a book.



The girl is safe in Muse's care. The maunga wears a dusting of snow.



Tre closes his eyes. They'll be free out there. Free to think. Their voices won't be hushed.

Press B

by Paul Mason

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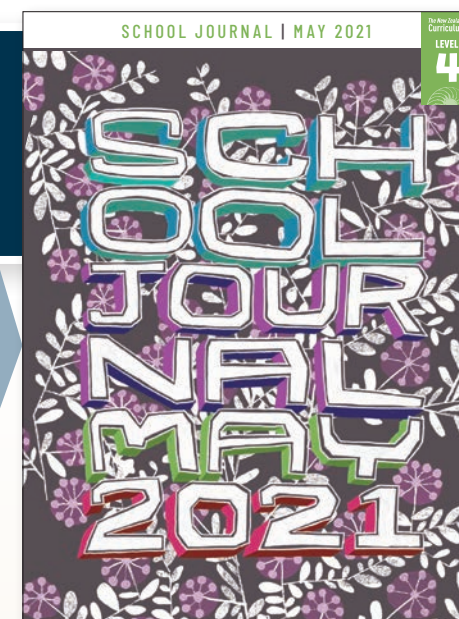
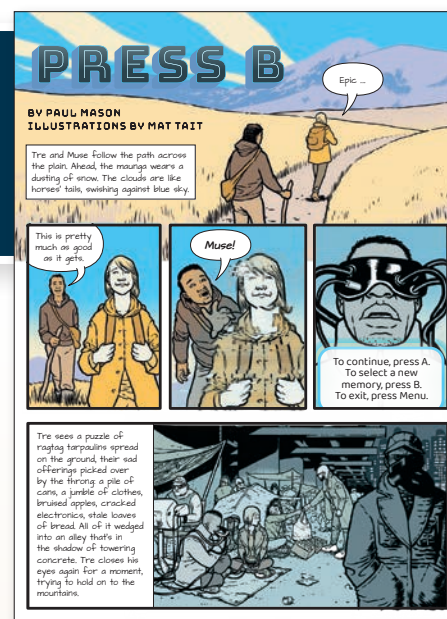
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Published 2021 by the Ministry of Education,
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www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77690 069 5 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Te Mako Orzecki, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 MAY 2021

Curriculum learning area	English
Reading year level	Year 8
Keywords	comic, courage, democracy, dystopian, fascism, friendship, future, government, Muse, power, rebellion, resistance, revolution, science fiction, sequel, social action, Tre, virtual reality